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THE WHOLE PICTURE
MOLENAER'S *ALLEGORY OF VANITY*

Jan Miense Molenaer (Dutch, about 1610–1668), ***Allegory of Vanity,*** oil on canvas, 1633. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1975.21

As a culture, the Dutch in the 1600s loved riddles, symbols, and allegories—perhaps especially those that communicated some moral lesson or insight. Proverbs, emblems, Calvinist teachings, prints of allegorical figures, and popular culture all influenced the choice of imagery in many Dutch 17th-century paintings, sometimes creating a kind of visual puzzle for the viewer to decipher.

"ALL IS VANITY"

Nearly every detail of Jan Miense Molenaer's painting of a prosperous 17th-century Dutch home symbolically conveys a moral message: the inevitability of death and the emptiness of worldly existence (***vanitas***, or **vanity**). The *vanitas* theme warns against the sinful indulgence of the senses. A love of material comforts seems apparent in the painting: the velvet, gold-embroidered satin, lace, and ermine of the young woman's costume; the expensive embossed and gilded leather chair, woven tapestry map, and painted harpsichord (called a virginal); and the imported Turkish rug and the box overflowing with jewels on the table.

"Vanity of vanities …all is vanity."

—Ecclesiastes 1:2

For interpretations of some of the many symbols in this painting, see the reverse side.

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PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

What do you think of when you see an image of a bald eagle? Or Barbie®? Or the Nike® "swoosh"? These images have associations for us beyond their most basic meanings (a bird of prey, a plastic doll, a brand of athletic wear). Similarly, in seeing *Allegory of Vanity*, the 17th-century Dutch viewer was likely to recognize some symbolism associated with the theme of *vanitas* (see front side) that may not be as obvious to the 21st-century viewer:

Mirrors are traditionally associated with personal vanity and the falseness of appearances. In other words, beauty and luxury are vain, empty pursuits.

Molenaer includes a number of **musical instruments** on the back wall (from left to right: cittern, violin, shawm, lute, recorder, transverse flute, and violoncello). In literature, popular imagery, and even sermons, music had often been associated since the Middle Ages with the enticement of the senses, specifically with love and sexuality. The lute in particular (placed prominently in the center) frequently implied lust.

A **chained monkey** was a popular symbol of humankind voluntarily shackled by sin. Monkeys were seen as foolish animals inclined to all sorts of vice. By placing his paw in the woman's slipper, the monkey makes a possibly obscene gesture.

Fig. 1. Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558–1617), *The Allegory of Transitoriness*, detail, engraving.

The **child blowing bubbles** is an allusion to the proverb *Homo bulla*: "Man is like a bubble," meaning life is fragile and brief (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 2. After Pieter Baltens (Flemish, 1527–1584), *De dans om de wereld (Dance around the World)*, detail, engraving.

The hemisphere of the **tapestry map** "resting on" the young woman's head identifies her as Lady World, the seductive embodiment of worldliness. She was typically depicted in popular prints with a globe or orb on her head and holding either a mirror or a bubble. By cleverly using the map to allude to this allegorical figure, Molenaer has made the image more natural (see Fig. 2).

The most common and obvious symbol of the brevity and vanity of earthly life, the **skull** here acts as a footrest for Lady World. Remarkably, at some time in the early 20th century, someone had obscured the *vanitas* message of the picture by painting an actual footstool over the skull!

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